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ABSTRACT

The manner in which a classroom teacher frames questions or directions to the students reveals his or her philosophy of reading and determines what the teacher does in the classroom. A written philosophy about reading for elementary schools can provide a sense of direction in making all kinds of important decisions, and can also furnish the cohesiveness and continuity of instructional effort required from one year to the next. Meetings with teachers, parents, and administrators of an elementary school over an 11-week period resulted in a broad declaration about reading and its unique place in the curriculum entitled "A Basic Reading Philosophy." Work during the next six months focused on specific guidelines to enact that declaration, and a list of provisos designed to serve that purpose was then drawn up. The declaration and provisos were used almost immediately in the selection of a new basal reading program for the school, and both documents are now incorporated in the school's Teacher's Handbook. (RS)

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For Want of Direction: Case for
a Written Philosophy of Reading

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For Want of Direction: Case for a Written Philosophy of Reading

Your philosophy of reading. Do you know it is revealed each time you speak in the classroom? Listen to the questions you ask, like "What's the title of our story today, Marcy?" or "Shawn, where's Tulsa?" or "How much are eight and four, Jim?" All these queries represent testing, not teaching. And, at best, this testing is only at a simple recall level. The reverse would be true if other questions, or directives transposed from questions, were used. Consider these: "Marcy, why do you think 'A Matter of Courage' is a good title for our story?" and "The text mentioned Tulsa. Let's find it on the map, Shawn" and "You'll need to set up chairs for the two groups, Jim. How many will you need?" In the latter three examples, children are involved beyond the mere memorization of facts and figures. For them, there is a perceived relevance to their reading. For them, there is thinking.

Now, listen to the oral assignments you make from day to day. Your philosophy is showing whenever you make such demands as, "For tomorrow, I want you to read Chapter Six. Be prepared to answer some questions over it later." Sound familiar? Compare it to this: "Chapter Six identifies three kinds of simple machines. Tomorrow, we'll see if we can classify some things we have at home under each. Bring in as many examples as you can." In the first case, students are being checked to see if they studied their lesson. In the second, the teacher is seeking to help children apply the information they have learned.

One's philosophical bent is further demonstrated by the way directions are given children. Do you dominate their actions, or do you guide, direct, and help boys and girls make rational decisions? Contrast "I want you chil-

dren to write down a new and clever ending to the story of 'The Speckled Band'" with "Let's think of a band of gypsies as 'The Speckled Band.'" How might our story's ending have changed as a result?" Is there any question which of the two instructions will better serve as a springboard to creative expression? I doubt if there is, for only in the second does the teacher provide a needed "beginning point" for youngsters.

Your beliefs about reading also determine what you do in the classroom. First, examine the instructional materials you use, asking such questions as:

1. Do you want each and every child to use the same book?
2. Do you try to keep all children on the same page, thinking they are easier to manage this way?
3. Is independent reading encouraged--for all children?
4. Do you avoid certain activities because the children become too noisy? and
5. Do youngsters look on their independent work periods as opportunities to "fool around"?

And, what about the physical setting of the classroom itself? Among other things, is furniture spaced so that girls and boys cannot communicate or look at one another? Does your desk dominate the front of the room? Do all the children face that desk? Is furniture moved as instructional needs warrant?

The feelings you hold about reading show in what the children say, as well. Listen to their responses. Do they sound like this: "How far do we have to go?" or "What if we finish before the others?" or "Do we have to write them all out?" Some might even say, "I don't like this stuff" or "Do we have to do it?" Children are little mirrors. They invariably reflect

the reading philosophy of their teachers. Therefore, in an environment dedicated to learning, would it not be more uplifting to hear: "Where can I find out what kind of snake this is?" or "Why wasn't the bear hurt by the cougar?" Such interrogatives and outcries of youngsters as "How does this work?" "I keep running out of time!" and "I want to finish this before going!" are not only inspiring and self-revealing, but they proclaim the teacher's attitude towards reading as well.

What the pupils actually do in the classroom also reveals your philosophy. One might ask, "How is the recitation period utilized?" and "Do children operate through whole-class instruction? Ability groups? Interest groups? Pairs?" Then too, what sequence, if any, do you follow in a reading lesson? Are opportunities provided for student research and writing? How do children use their independent study periods? Whatever the answer you might give, is your emphasis on testing, or is it on learning and meaningful application of that learning?

This brings us to the topic of evaluation. The techniques you use for assessment of progress are incorporated within, and inevitably project, your philosophy of reading. Consider how you mark student papers. Do you dwell on how much a person missed or how much the individual learned? Do you make corrections, or do you require the children to do so? Is a value always placed on written work, through the use of minus points or A, B, C, D, and E marks? Have you ever thought about replacing some of those grades with written comments like "Good work," "Neat paper," "You are doing much better now," or "You need some help with this. See me when you've a chance."?

Truly, your reading philosophy shows in all that you do and say in the

classroom--and in all that is done and said by your pupils. Indeed, it was these same reasons which prompted me to enter into dialogue with one of our local elementary principals, over the prospects of drawing up a reading philosophy for the school she headed in Las Vegas, Nevada. A written philosophy about reading, I felt, could provide a sense of direction in making all kinds of important decisions, as well as furnish the cohesiveness and continuity of instructional effort required from one year to the next at the school. What was needed was a concise and clear-cut expression of beliefs about reading--something foundational in nature, yet inclusive of the principles required to straightforwardly deal with various aspects of reading instruction. The principal came to share these same convictions and, after setting a written philosophy of reading as our goal, the two of us set about mapping out our agenda.

First Phase of the Experiment

After giving careful consideration to various alternatives, we scheduled the first eleven weeks as follows:

- Week 1: Addresses to the entire faculty by the principal and by me
- Week 2: Discussion meeting with four kindergarten and four first-grade teachers
- Week 3: Discussion meeting with the Reading Improvement Program (RIP) teacher, five second-grade and three third-grade teachers
- Week 4: Discussion meeting with two special education teachers, four fourth-grade and four fifth-grade teachers
- Week 5: Discussion meeting with four parents of schoolchildren and,

later, a talk between the principal and me

Weeks 6-11: Joint discussion meetings with K-5, special education, and
RIP teacher representatives and the administration

For the most part, our initial meeting was promotional in nature. Short, informal speeches focused on (1) the centrality of reading and other forms of communication, (2) the decisive role of teachers in children's language acquisition, and (3) the pressing need for collaboration in putting together a statement that could pilot much of the decision making in the school's reading program. Later, to apprise teachers of the scope of the undertaking, some time was given to discussion of a timetable.

During the second through fifth week, I met with various teacher groups, several parents, and the principal. Dialogue at these parleys was sparked by interrogatives I considered pivotal in developing a reading philosophy for a school, namely:

1. What kind of environment is conducive to learning?
2. What is reading?
3. What is the goal of reading? . . . of the other language arts?
How do these goals relate to each other?
4. In what ways, generally speaking, should reading/language arts instruction be accomplished? and
5. How should reading progress be evaluated?

A single meeting with each constituent group, beginning usually at 8:00AM and lasting about forty minutes, proved more than adequate for discussion and clarification of these questions. Conferees were asked at each session to think about the queries, write down their reactions, and give completed re-

sponses to the school's office manager by a given date. All feedback was then classified for quick and easy reference; e.g., fourth-grade teacher responses.

Whereas the first several weeks aimed at generating raw data from our discussions, the following six were bent on processing the information collected. All confabs were chaired by me, and sought input from the RIP teacher; one of the two special education teachers; the principal and/or assistant principal; and a teacher representative from each grade level, kindergarten through the fifth. Discussions centered on the rather diverse answers of parents, teachers, and administrators to any one or more of the questions. First to be considered, by way of example, were written replies to, "What kind of environment is conducive to learning?"

Parent Comments: Make reading a priority in your (their) lives.

Learning environment--structured teacher, quiet environment over noisy; pillows

Administrator Comments: Positive reinforcement; consistently monitored; orderly; logical consequences. Students know what is expected of them. Mutual respect is established.

Teacher Comments:

Kindergarten: It needs to be a quiet atmosphere. Students need to be challenged. Meet individual differences; self-motivating

First Grade: Sometimes quiet; structured; good model; positive reinforcement; varied approaches; flexible

Second Grade: Controlled freedom; friendly, relaxed; stimulating; manageable size

Third Grade: Clean; colorful and attractive; organized; friendly,

warm atmosphere; reasonably quiet during work periods; listening station to listen to stories; comfortable; structured

Fourth Grade: Clean; orderly; well-lighted; controlled temperature; comfortable (physically and emotionally); quiet--non-distracting; stimulating; sense of purpose; OK to err

Fifth Grade: Positive; structured, routine; sufficient materials; motivation; incentives

Semantic commonalities were legion among the replies cited above. To illustrate this point, consider the shared meaning of orderly, structured, organized, and controlled freedom--all written in response to this one particular question. Moreover, certain of the feedback was subsumed under descriptors viewed as more inclusive, as in the case with colorful and attractive. Panelists regarded this answer as only one of several explanations for a learning environment adjudged stimulating. Though some respondents chose identical words, others replied in more distinctive ways. For example, the singularity of logical consequences, students need to be challenged, or good model was in stark contrast to a repeated use of quiet, structured, and friendly as answers.

Think about yet another set of replies--this time, about those written in response to, "What is reading?"

Parent Comments: Oral language put on paper. Reading is a means to knowledge/information. A way of opening and expanding people's words.

Administrator Comments: Good decoding skills; learning "hooks" established; fluency; good understanding of language and relationship

of reading and speaking.

Teacher Comments:

Kindergarten: Able to attack unknown words successfully.

Understand what they are reading (comprehension).

First Grade: Thought process. Meaning to print. Decoding symbols. Ties in with experience and language development.

Second Grade: Knowing what the written page is saying. Comprehending what is written. Exchange of ideas between writer and reader. Could create creative thinking; stimulates imagination.

Third Grade: The ability to decode a written language visually and derive from it the meaning of communication. Crawling into reader's mind.

Fourth Grade: Putting symbols into thoughts and ideas vocabulary. Experience and exposure to build on vicarious experience.

Fifth Grade: Comprehension of written word. Gathering information. Relate to life experiences. Enjoyment.

Again, shared meaning was evident in any number of remarks, as with oral language put on paper, relationship of reading and speaking, meaning to print, knowing what the written page is saying, and exchange of ideas between writer and reader. In these, one must agree, the bond between oral and written expression was clearly reaffirmed by parents, administrators, and teachers alike. Additionally, as was true with feedback to the first question, certain of the responses were subordinated by rubrics considered more embraceive. Take good decoding skills, able to attack unknown words successfully,

decoding symbols, the ability to decode a written language visually, and putting symbols into thoughts and ideas vocabulary as examples. These were logically categorized under prerequisites to understanding; other replies, under products of understanding. And so the process continued, making one decision after another, from one set of answers to the next.

While essentially all responses were considered by the committee, a few had to be disregarded because of ambiguity or a perceived lack of relevance to the goal at hand; i.e., framing a reading philosophy for the school. It was towards this end that teachers, administrators, and I worked for a month and a half, meeting weekly to analyze, discuss, and synthesize data. A designee always jotted down major points on which the group was in agreement, and turned his/her notes over to me once a session drew to a close. Later, but before the next meeting, I arranged each medley of thoughts into sentences and paragraphs. These, in turn, were critiqued and rewritten when the committee met again. Eventually, all revisions were finalized and **A BASIC READING PHILOSOPHY** emerged:

Reading is understanding the printed word. Because reading represents thinking and speaking, written down, it must never be separated from oral and written expression.

Best carried out in a quiet and nonthreatening, yet stimulating environment, reading instruction requires positive reinforcement and guidance if youngsters are to enjoy reading and learning is to take place. Whereas the reading independence of boys and girls is the aim of instruction, information and pleasure remain the twin goals of reading itself.

ing/reading needs of children.

The foregoing requests were spread out rather evenly over a six- to seven-month period and, like in the initial phase of the experiment, teacher responses were organized by grade level or similar classification. Also, as before, written feedback became the subject matter for a series of group discussions. This time around, however, committee members were intent on identifying the underlying principles which had predisposed teachers in their choice of techniques for teaching reading. I again chaired each round table, but now also made note of the precepts on which there was some consensus within the group. My notations, between one session and the next, I transcribed into specific principles that I felt mirrored the group's sentiments. These principles, in turn, were critically reviewed by the committee, and eventually made part of the following **PROVISOS**:

To establish and maintain a bond between oral expression and reading,

1. Oral communication must require the proper use of words, fluency, and meaningful expression;
2. The teacher must provide a model by which children can emulate meaningful and correct¹ oral expression;
3. Occasions for oral communication must require due emphasis on listening comprehension involving recall, reasoning, evaluation, and other aspects of thinking; and
4. Training in listening comprehension must be provided children, requiring plans and direction by the teacher.

To establish and maintain a bond between written expression and reading,

1. Written communication must require the presentation of complete thoughts, legible handwriting, correct spelling and mechanics;
2. Occasions for written communication must require due emphasis on reading comprehension involving recall, reasoning, evaluation, and other aspects of thinking;
3. Children must be systematically taught those writing skills which function to inform, inquire, convince, and give explanation;
4. The teacher's role in creative writing begins and ends with providing ideas and opportunities for individual expression, with products characterized by freedom and originality of content and style; and
5. The teacher must provide a model by which children can emulate meaningful and correct¹ written expression.

To provide positive reinforcement in the development of reading skills,

1. The language and gestures of a teacher must function to encourage successful performance of boys and girls;
2. The words of children, whether written or oral, must be viewed as contributions having worth;
3. The methodology of a teacher, and physical arrangement of a classroom, must work in concert to maximize student involvement in learning; and
4. Children must be encouraged to compete against their own records of achievement, not against performances of their class-

mates.

To provide guidance in the development of reading skills,

1. Ongoing communication must be maintained between the teacher and parents of children;
2. Teacher expectancies must challenge pupil abilities;
3. The teacher must capitalize on the interests and strengths of youngsters;
4. Daily readiness must be established to enable children to meet with success in the tasks of reading;
5. The teacher must furnish on-task monitoring as youngsters complete their silent reading assignments; and
6. Basic ideas must be summarized at the close of each reading lesson.

To assess the reading needs of students,

1. Diagnosis must be a continuous process;
2. The teacher must test, not teach;
3. Diagnostic procedures must be comprehensive enough to identify independent and instructional levels, and specific enough to identify the skills needing improvement; and
4. Significant diagnostic findings must be fully recorded, for study and for planning of appropriate instruction.

Postscript

The two documents, **A BASIC READING PHILOSOPHY** and its **PROVISOS**, were completed none too soon. Almost immediately, both were utilized in the se-

lection of a new basal program for the school--a move that represented an expenditure of about \$17,000.00 for reading materials.

Each document now appears in the school's Teacher's Handbook and, with some encouragement, will be put to use when pedagogic or other concerns arise. Too, as individuals perceive a need for change in policy, the two documents doubtless will undergo revision. Amendments, however, must be handled as future circumstances warrant. What's really important is that, now, there's something in place to assist in decision making at the school--a clear-cut statement of reading philosophy and guidelines to ensure its attainment.

Footnotes

- ¹ "Correct" here refers to standard English usage.